

*File-Speeches-
Vital Trends*

AUTOMATED RECORD KEEPING INCREASES FIRE HAZARD

The foolishness of keeping unprotected business records is literally playing with fire. In addition to the dangers of fire and flood, the plastic tapes and microfilm used widely to store data, add new factors to the protection of records. These media are more vulnerable than paper to nature's destructive powers. Tapes and microfilm can lose their information from causes that would not affect paper records. Nearby magnetic fields produced by electric motors or transformers could destroy or distort information on magnetic tapes. Microfilm may develop "measles" from certain temperature-humidity conditions. Tab cards can warp or buckle under extremes of humidity and cause massive rejects on a computer.

Lewis A. Vincent, vice president, American Insurance Assn., pinpoints some of the danger spots that need special attention to protect both office equipment and records. The four primary areas he names are: (1) incapacitation or loss of expensive electronic equipment (computers); (2) accounts receivable which must be available to substantiate claims; (3) one-of-a-kind papers which, if lost, lose monetary value or legal force; (4) office alterations which multiply fire hazards and expose records to a variety of potentially destructive conditions. Loss due to the destruction or temporary breakdown of the records or equipment could result in a business's cessation.

Since science hasn't found a truly noncombustible material for storing records, records managers, insurance companies and concerned associations have had to set standards to minimize the dangers of fire and other hazards. In so doing they are battling the laws of probability, which is a defensive war. The best weapons available are a company's ability to

classify its records and protect them in fire-resistant vaults, safes and insulated files.

Before making a decision, the company must appraise the relative importance of its various records, the maximum fire hazard exposure, amount of space needed to house records and the type of media used to store them. Records are generally classified as vital, important, useful and nonessential. Obviously, vital records should receive maximum protection and nonessential records the minimum.

For maximum protection the fire-resistive vault is recommended.

According to the code set by the National Fire Protection Assn., it can be either structurally part of the framework of a building or separate and self-supporting, it must have no openings except a door, no sprinkler system or air conditioning. The door must be an accepted vault door, and the vault size should not exceed 5000 cu. ft. All wiring must be in conduits with electricity fed through a short extension connected to an outside outlet. All shelving, files and other equipment must be made of noncombustible material with records stored in enclosed containers as much as possible.

If the volume of records exceeds 5000 cu. ft. they may be placed in an isolated fire-resistive building which should not exceed 25,000 cu. ft. It has been found that the larger the area for records storage, the greater the chance for fire. In locating vaults, warns Continental Insurance Companies, remember that they are not usually water tight, and are susceptible to water damage during a fire.

A records fileroom provides space for handling and storing large volumes of current records. The walls should be resistant to fires outside the room. The fileroom does not afford the protective capability

of a vault and is not recommended for the most vital records. Insurance companies do not consider it suitable as an "only means of protecting either vital or important records." This room should not exceed 50,000 cu. ft. and doors should be labeled "File Room Door." Automatic sprinklers are permitted and, because file clerks and other people will use the room, "no smoking" should be strictly enforced.

Fire-resistive safes and files are generally movable and provide protection anywhere for various periods of time. They must bear labels such as the Underwriters Laboratories or Safe Manufacturers National Assn. Classifications from A to E represent the standard number of hours for which the safe will protect at a given temperature.

Because there is no absolutely safe means of protecting records it is generally recommended that duplicates be made of all vital and important records. An example of this precaution paying off in a situation with possible disastrous consequences was the Pentagon fire of 1952. Fire destroyed tapes and equipment in a computer room but fortunately all the information was on a duplicate set of tapes. Duplicate tapes should be stored in a safe place as far away from the original set as is feasible.

Useful records should be protected by the use of noncombustible files and removed from combustible materials.

Nonessential records do not need any special protection under the insurance code. However they should be reviewed and disposed of on a regular schedule to keep combustible materials at a minimum.

¹¹ Since the advent of automated systems and machines, the records manager has had to deal with more delicate storage media. This media is susceptible to damage at temperatures below the ignition point of paper. Whereas paper will ignite at 400° F., microfilm and plastic tapes are

generally damaged by sustained heat exceeding 150° F. and damage is greatly increased by the addition of moisture. //

Continental Insurance Companies recommends that "plastic records should be stored in safes, devices or files which have been designed specifically to protect against excessive temperature-humidity conditions or stored in moisture sealed containers which will not ignite, decompose, melt, distort or develop fumes when subject to temperatures of 350° F., and located inside the approved enclosure."

Plastic records should not be kept in the same enclosure as paper records. Periodic inspection of microfilm is recommended to check deterioration and special precautions should be taken for storage areas next to exterior walls or in basements for dampness.

// It must be remembered that EDP equipment is very susceptible to damage from heat and smoke from the smallest fire and from extinguishing equipment, especially water. It should be housed, therefore, in its own compartment and separated from the rest of the building by fire-resistant walls. The fire hazard is usually determined by the degree of fire risk in the rest of the building. Particular attention should be paid to cable ducts under the floor, and ceiling cavities. Ducts and pipework should be designed so that no smoke or heat can spread into the computer room. Passages should be made of noncombustible materials and automatic drop flaps fitted wherever walls have to cut through. //

The rules are no good unless obeyed. To utilize the protection available from vaults, specially constructed filerooms insulated files and safes, it is important to know how they are designed and how they work. Detailed information is available from the National Fire Protection Assn., 60 Batterymarch St., Boston 02110; and in the booklet "Recommended Good Practice for the Protection of EDP & Industrial Automation" from Factory

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